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Religious Multicultural Education as a Middle Path: Beyond Liberal Multiculturalism and Its Contribution to the SDGs in the Indonesian Muslim Majority Context

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Abstract

Objective: Assess the limitations of the liberal and theological multicultural education paradigm and formulate an alternative framework that is able to bridge the two in the context of a majority Muslim society such as Indonesia. **Theoretical framework:** Integrating critical multicultural education with Religious Studies as a non-confessional, phenomenological, and dialogical approach that serves as a bridge between secular relativism and theological absolutism. **Literature review:** Based on an interdisciplinary literature review in multicultural education, religious education, and educational philosophy that highlights criticism of liberal and theological paradigms. **Method:** Using a qualitative approach with philosophical and conceptual design through literature studies and expert interviews to strengthen theoretical analysis. **Results:** The liberal paradigm tends to marginalize religion to the private sphere, while the theological paradigm is exclusive and less dialogical. Alternatively, Religious Multicultural Education is proposed as a middle ground approach that emphasizes epistemic plurality and interreligious dialogue. **Implications:** Contribute to the development of more inclusive education policies and curricula in a religiously plural society that faces tensions between secular and confessional models. **Novelty:** It lies in the synthesis between multicultural education and Religious Studies that produces a new model that is contextual, dialogical, and transcends the existing paradigm dichotomy.

Keywords: religious, multicultural education, liberal, sdgs, muslim majority.

INTRODUCTION

Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 and SDG 16, this study addresses a critical research gap in the Indonesian Muslim-majority context, where empirical models of religiously grounded multicultural education remain limited and fragmented. Existing scholarship tends to adopt liberal multicultural frameworks or normative theological assertions without integrating pedagogical design and measurable social outcomes. Moreover, there is insufficient evidence on how faith-based educational approaches can simultaneously strengthen religious identity and foster inclusive citizenship

that contributes to peacebuilding, social cohesion, and sustainable development. This gap necessitates a contextualized framework that bridges doctrinal commitments with practical strategies for achieving inclusive and equitable education in line with global development agendas [1].

The challenge of cultivating multicultural cohesion in religious societies of the East differs substantially from that faced in liberal Western contexts. In Western settings, multiculturalism has largely evolved in response to immigration, with policy debates centering on integration, assimilation, and their sociopolitical consequences [1]. In contrast, in many Eastern religious societies, resistance emerges not primarily from demographic change but from principled objections to the ideological foundations of multiculturalism itself, particularly pluralism, liberalism, and secularism, which are often perceived as incompatible with deeply embedded religious worldviews and normative traditions. Moreover, the expansion of sexual liberties intrinsic to liberal thought constitutes a particular flashpoint in many Eastern contexts, where such developments are widely perceived as eroding established moral and religious norms [2]. Consequently, whereas Western debates on multiculturalism tend to focus on the effectiveness of integration and accommodation mechanisms, discourses in religious Eastern societies are more centrally concerned with preserving religious identity and moral authority in the face of perceived ideological intrusion.

Multicultural education in Western contexts is frequently framed as a threat to national cohesion, as illustrated by cases in France and the United States. In France, resistance is rooted in *laïcité*, which underlies opposition to incorporating religious expressions, particularly Islamic practices, into public education. The 2004 ban on conspicuous religious symbols, including the hijab, in state schools reflects concerns that multicultural accommodation undermines secular national identity [3]. Consequently, the cultural freedoms associated with multicultural education are substantially constrained.

In the United States, multicultural education has been criticized for allegedly weakening academic standards. This concern was institutionalized in Arizona's House Bill 2281, which prohibited Mexican-American Studies programs because they promoted ethnic solidarity, political resistance, and "hate-filled" content at the expense of individual achievement [4], [5]. Critics, however, view the policy as reinforcing dominant narratives and marginalizing minority histories. Similar ideological anxieties surround Critical Race Theory, leading several states to restrict its inclusion in school curricula over claims of political indoctrination and social division [6]–[8].

Debates on multicultural education are inherently complex, as they intersect with broader social, political, and cultural issues. Resistance to multicultural curricula is thus to be expected, since such programs are often perceived as threatening the prevailing social capital within specific communities. In many contexts, challengers argue that multicultural education undermines cohesive norms and shared values, thereby jeopardizing the social cohesion that sustains collective identity [9]. Consequently, critiques of multicultural pedagogy frequently reflect deeper anxieties about cultural preservation, political authority, and the redistribution of social power.

Contemporary debates on multicultural education reveal a persistent theoretical and practical tension, particularly in religiously plural societies. While multicultural education has been widely promoted as a normative framework for managing diversity, its dominant paradigms remain contested. Liberal multicultural education, which emphasizes value neutrality, cultural relativism, and individual autonomy, has been criticized for its limited sensitivity to religious worldviews that claim absolute truth and normative authority [10]. In many religious societies, such an approach is perceived not as inclusive but as marginalizing faith-based identities by relegating religion to the private sphere. Conversely, the growing appeal of theologically grounded multicultural education reflects an effort to reassert religious norms within educational spaces [11]. However, this approach often

reproduces exclusivist, apologetic, and polemical orientations that contradict the egalitarian and dialogical aspirations of multiculturalism itself.

This unresolved tension raises a fundamental academic problem: how can multicultural education be conceptualized in a way that neither dismisses religion through liberal relativism nor instrumentalizes it through theological absolutism? Existing frameworks appear insufficient to address the complex realities of societies in which religion remains a central source of meaning, morality, and collective identity. This study departs from this academic unease by critically examining the dominant paradigms of multicultural education and exploring the possibility of an alternative epistemological foundation. By situating Religious Studies as a non-confessional, critical, and dialogical discipline, this article seeks to articulate Religious Multicultural Education (RME) as a prospective middle path, one that integrates the critical commitments of multicultural education with a scholarly understanding of religion. In doing so, it aims to offer a theoretically robust and contextually relevant framework for multicultural education in religious societies such as Indonesia.

Novelty and Implications. The novelty of this study lies in its epistemological integration of multicultural education and Religious Studies, resulting in Religious Multicultural Education (RME) as a dialogical, non-confessional, and context-sensitive framework. This model moves beyond the dichotomy of liberal relativism and theological absolutism by affirming ethical commitments while recognizing epistemic plurality. Unlike existing approaches, RME offers a balanced paradigm that accommodates religious normativity without undermining inclusivity or critical inquiry. Its relevance to the SDGs is particularly significant, as it provides a culturally grounded educational model that supports inclusive and equitable learning environments. RME contributes to the SDGs by fostering interreligious dialogue, strengthening social cohesion, and promoting ethical responsibility within plural societies. Furthermore, it enhances the practical implementation of the SDGs by aligning global educational goals with local moral frameworks. In policy terms, RME offers strategic guidance for curriculum development and educational reform that advance SDGs, peacebuilding, and sustainable social development in religiously diverse contexts [10].

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discourse on multicultural education has evolved through diverse theoretical trajectories, particularly within liberal, critical, and religious frameworks. In liberal traditions, scholars such as Banks and Kymlicka conceptualize multicultural education as a means to ensure equality, recognition, and democratic participation within plural societies. This approach emphasizes value neutrality, individual autonomy, and cultural accommodation, aligning with global educational agendas including the SDGs, especially in promoting inclusive and equitable learning environments. However, critics argue that such frameworks often marginalize religion by confining it to the private sphere, thereby limiting its relevance to the SDGs in deeply religious societies [10].

Critical multicultural education extends this debate by interrogating power structures, epistemic dominance, and the exclusion of marginalized voices. It highlights how educational systems reproduce inequalities and calls for transformative pedagogies that advance social justice. In relation to the SDGs, this perspective contributes to discussions on equity, inclusion, and reduced inequalities, yet it often remains insufficiently attentive to the normative role of religion as a moral and cultural resource.

Conversely, theological approaches to multicultural education seek to re-center religion as the primary epistemological foundation. Within Islamic educational thought, scholars emphasize the integration of faith, morality, and social harmony. This perspective resonates with the ethical dimensions of the SDGs, particularly in fostering moral responsibility and

community cohesion. Nevertheless, its reliance on doctrinal absolutism may limit dialogical engagement and hinder broader contributions to the SDGs in plural contexts [11].

Recent scholarship has begun to explore integrative approaches that bridge secular and religious paradigms. Religious Studies, as a non-confessional and multidisciplinary field, offers a promising foundation for such synthesis. By emphasizing phenomenological understanding, dialogue, and epistemic plurality, it aligns closely with the SDGs' emphasis on peace, justice, and inclusive societies. This emerging perspective suggests that the SDGs can be more effectively advanced when global frameworks are translated into culturally and religiously resonant educational models.

Despite these developments, a significant gap remains in conceptualizing a cohesive framework that integrates multicultural education, religious epistemology, and the SDGs within Muslim-majority societies. This study responds to this gap by proposing Religious Multicultural Education as a dialogical and context-sensitive model capable of bridging existing paradigms while strengthening the contribution of education to the SDGs.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in a philosophical approach, with the primary objective of constructing Religious Multicultural Education (RME) as an applied and integrative framework derived from Religious Studies and multicultural education. Rather than relying on empirical measurement, the research is conceptual in nature, emphasizing theoretical reconstruction, critical reflection, and epistemological clarification of multicultural education within religious societies. This orientation is particularly relevant for examining how educational paradigms may contribute to broader global agendas such as the SDGs, especially in contexts where religion remains a central source of moral authority [11].

The object of analysis focuses on the conceptual foundations, defining characteristics, and scholarly formulation of RME. These elements are examined through the lens of interdisciplinary scholarship, integrating insights from Religious Studies, philosophy of education, religious education, and multicultural education. The study draws upon an extensive review of academic literature, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and policy-related documents that engage with issues of diversity, religion, and education. In relation to the SDGs, particular attention is given to literature addressing inclusive education, social cohesion, and ethical development. To strengthen the conceptual analysis, the study is complemented by selective interviews with scholars specializing in Religious Studies and multicultural education, providing expert perspectives that enrich the theoretical discourse and its relevance to the SDGs.

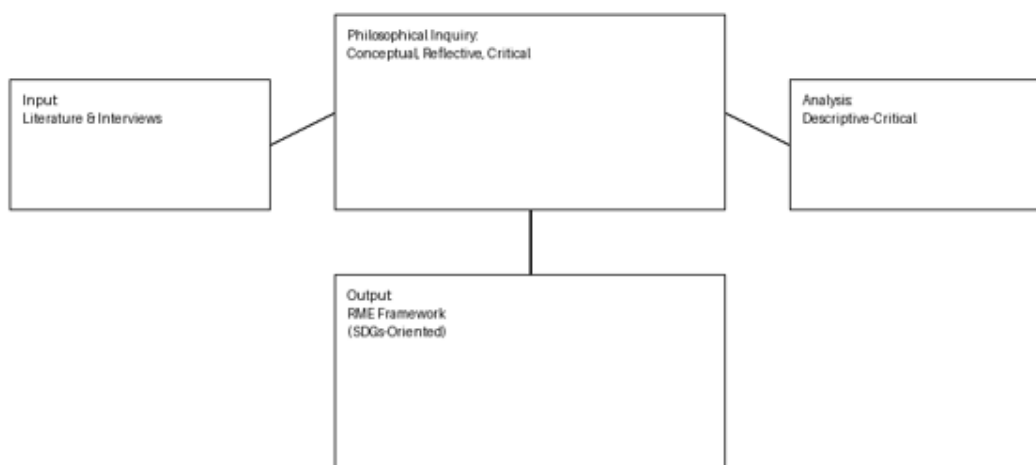


Figure 1. Diagram of Research Process and Method

Methodologically, the research applies philosophical inquiry through conceptual, reflective, and critical modes of analysis. Conceptual analysis is used to clarify key terms and constructs related to multicultural education and religion, while reflective analysis enables the examination of underlying assumptions within dominant paradigms. Critical analysis is employed to evaluate the limitations of liberal and theological approaches, particularly in their capacity to address the normative and dialogical dimensions required for achieving the SDGs. These analytical processes are essential for identifying gaps and tensions within existing frameworks.

Data analysis follows a descriptive-critical approach, involving systematic interpretation of key concepts, critical assessment of competing paradigms, and the synthesis of theoretical insights. Through this process, the study formulates the core characteristics, objectives, and success indicators of RME as a mediating framework. The emphasis on synthesis allows for the integration of diverse perspectives while maintaining conceptual coherence. In doing so, the study positions RME as a theoretically grounded and context-sensitive paradigm capable of bridging liberal and theologically exclusive models of multicultural education, while simultaneously enhancing the educational contribution to the SDGs in religiously plural societies [12]–[14].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The section examines major paradigms of multicultural education and proposes an alternative framework for religiously plural societies. It begins with an overview of liberal multicultural education and its commitments to neutrality and relativism, followed by critiques of its limited accommodation of religious worldviews. The discussion then addresses the challenges of theologically based multicultural education, particularly its exclusivist and apologetic tendencies. In response, the chapter introduces Religious Studies as a non-confessional and dialogical epistemological alternative and concludes by proposing Religious Multicultural Education (RME) as a middle path that integrates critical multiculturalism with a scholarly understanding of religion, offering a contextually relevant framework for societies.

Liberal Paradigm of Multicultural Education

The liberal paradigm of multicultural education is rooted in the normative foundations of liberal political theory, particularly its emphasis on individual autonomy, equality, and rights-based justice [12]–[14]. This paradigm emerged as an educational response to increasing cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity in Western democratic societies during the late twentieth century. Its central aim is to foster democratic citizenship and social cohesion by ensuring equal recognition and inclusion of diverse identities within a shared civic framework [15].

At the philosophical level, liberal multicultural education draws significantly on Rawls' conception of political liberalism, which emphasizes state neutrality toward competing conceptions of the good life [16]. Within this framework, education is expected to cultivate citizens capable of rational deliberation while refraining from privileging particular moral or religious worldviews. Kymlicka extends this liberal foundation by arguing that minority cultural rights are not opposed to liberalism but rather essential to protecting individual autonomy, particularly for members of minority groups whose cultural contexts are vulnerable within majoritarian societies. Complementing this approach, Taylor's politics of recognition highlights the moral importance of acknowledging cultural identities as a precondition for dignity and equality [17].

In educational theory and practice, James A. Banks plays a central role in translating liberal multicultural principles into pedagogical frameworks. Banks conceptualizes multicultural education as a reform movement designed to restructure educational institutions so that students from diverse backgrounds can experience educational equality.

Key components of this approach include content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and the creation of an empowering school culture. Within this paradigm, diversity is primarily addressed through curriculum reform, inclusive representation, and the promotion of intercultural understanding grounded in democratic values [18].

Religious diversity, however, occupies an ambivalent position within the liberal paradigm of multicultural education. While religion is acknowledged as one dimension of cultural identity, it is often reframed in secularized or privatized terms to preserve the liberal commitment to public neutrality [19]. Consequently, religious beliefs are accommodated insofar as they align with liberal norms of individual autonomy, gender equality, and human rights. Normative religious claims that derive authority from transcendent or communal sources tend to be marginalized or excluded from the public educational sphere, as they are perceived to challenge liberal neutrality [20].

This tension reveals a structural limitation within liberal multicultural education. Its emphasis on individual rights and procedural neutrality often conceals substantive secular-liberal assumptions regarding morality, rationality, and the nature of the good life [21]. As Parekh argues, liberal multiculturalism risks becoming culturally partial when it universalizes Western liberal values while treating non-liberal or religious moral frameworks as obstacles to pluralism rather than as alternative normative resources. This limitation becomes particularly pronounced in societies where religion constitutes a central source of moral authority and collective identity.

In non-Western contexts such as Indonesia, where religion plays a foundational role in public life and national ideology, the liberal paradigm of multicultural education encounters significant conceptual and practical challenges. Although it offers valuable tools for managing diversity, its secular orientation may inadequately engage religious traditions as constructive agents of multicultural coexistence. This gap underscores the need for alternative frameworks that seek to integrate religious normativity into multicultural education while maintaining commitments to mutual respect and social harmony. Before addressing this need, it is necessary to examine why liberal multicultural education is insufficient.

Objections to the Liberal Paradigm of Multicultural Education

Rejection of multicultural education in Indonesia frequently rests on objections to religious pluralism. Prihanto argues that multicultural curricula extend beyond instruction on cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity to promote religious pluralism, relativism, and secular humanism. Those are tenets he believes are incompatible with nurturing students' devotion to Allah. He contends that true educational aims should prioritize the development of individuals who are steadfast in faith rather than skeptical of divine truth [22]. Similarly, Hadi warns that multiculturalism's tendency to dilute the concept of God cannot be underestimated, as a clear understanding of the divine is central to a student's spiritual formation. Accordingly, he maintains that Islamic education must reaffirm the concept of God through the framework of *adab* (ethics), thereby preserving religious authenticity and guiding learners toward piety [23].

The proliferation of *Sekolah Sunnah* in Indonesia exemplifies a tangible manifestation of resistance to multicultural education rooted in anti-pluralistic sentiment. With approximately 1,900 institutions bearing the *Sunnah* designation and some 228 schools officially affiliated with the Association of Indonesian *Sunnah* Schools (ASESI) as of 2018, these schools emphasize a rigorous, exclusivist interpretation of Islam grounded solely in the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* [24]. Their curricula prioritize doctrinal "purification" (*tahdhib al 'aqidah*) and routinely reject local traditions deemed *bid'ah* (heresy), sometimes eschewing the national education system entirely in favor of intensive religious instruction. Such an educational model fosters a homogeneous, insular environment in which students are

inculcated with rigid theological views, leaving little room for alternative Islamic perspectives or broader social pluralism. Consequently, Sekolah Sunnah illustrates how anti-pluralism can translate into institutional practices that oppose the aims of multicultural education [25].

Another illustrative case of institutional bias emerged at SMP Citra Kasih Ambon, Indonesia, where the school principal refused to admit a twelve-year-old applicant, PB, solely because she wore a jilbab. During the registration process at the Citraland campus in Lateri, Baguala district, Maluku Province, PB was effectively barred from enrollment because the school sought to avoid visible differences among its students. This discriminatory practice compelled PB's family to seek out a more inclusive educational setting, ultimately registering her at another institution reputed for its openness and tolerance. Such incidents highlight how school policies premised on uniformity can infringe upon students' rights to religious expression and drive families toward alternatives that better accommodate cultural and religious diversity [26].

The second rationale for opposing liberal multicultural education rests on its recognition of LGBT identities as deserving of respect and inclusion. In her critique, Cris Mayo challenges the educational system, like other social institutions, as fundamentally shaped by heterosexist assumptions, which posit heterosexuality as the normative orientation. Mayo demonstrates how curricula, teaching materials, and school policies frequently reinforce heterosexism: for instance, science lessons analogizing magnetic attraction to heterosexual relationships implicitly marginalize non-heteronormative experiences. By interrogating these entrenched practices, Mayo underscores the extent to which heterosexism permeates everyday pedagogy, thereby revealing why incorporation of LGBT perspectives within multicultural frameworks provokes resistance from those who view such inclusion as a threat to established educational norms [27].

Regional governments in Indonesia have enacted policies that explicitly reject or prohibit LGBT-related activities. For example, in Depok, West Java, a directive was implemented to “cleanse” the municipality of its LGBT community, asserting that LGBT identities contravened religious and cultural values. This policy garnered support from segments of the populace who perceive LGBT individuals as a threat to morality and social order [28]. Such measures illustrate how institutional and popular attitudes converge to marginalize sexual minorities under the guise of preserving communal mores.

Religious organizations in Indonesia, notably the Indonesian Ulema Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI), have consistently opposed both the existence and rights of LGBT individuals [29]. The MUI, along with various conservative Islamic groups, characterizes LGBT identities as deviant behaviors that contravene Islamic teachings. These organizations frequently frame their rejection of LGBT rights as necessary for the preservation of public morality and the defense of religious values, which they regard as foundational to the nation's identity [30]. Accordingly, their sustained opposition has significantly influenced public discourse and policy, reinforcing the marginalization of sexual minorities in Indonesian society.

Indonesian schools and universities have prohibited organizations or activities related to LGBT issues, premised on the belief that the presence of LGBT communities within educational environments threatens student morality and social order [31]. In 2020, for instance, a university in West Sumatra banned public discussions addressing LGBT topics, citing the need to uphold cultural and religious norms. Such institutional restrictions reflect broader anxieties about the influence of non-heteronormative identities on youth, and they serve to legitimize the exclusion of sexual minorities from academic discourse. Consequently, these policies reinforce a normative framework that privileges conservative values over inclusive educational practices.

Within religious communities, LGBT individuals are often presumed to possess low levels of religiosity. Umar et al. report that respondents identifying as LGBT exhibited

weaker understanding, practice, and internalization of Islamic tenets compared to their non LGBT peers [32]. Their study revealed a statistically significant correlation between religious non-adherence, manifested by omissions of daily prayers and limited proficiency in Qur'anic recitation, and LGBT identity [33]. Therefore, these findings reinforce prevailing stereotypes that equate non-heteronormative sexual orientation with deficient religious commitment.

Third, beyond specific value disputes, religious communities raise a more structural objection regarding the secularization of religion within educational frameworks. Liberal multicultural education tends to treat religion as a private identity or cultural marker rather than as a comprehensive moral and normative system. In the Indonesian context, where religion is constitutionally recognized and socially embedded, this privatization is perceived as a form of epistemic marginalization. Religious education is expected not only to transmit cultural knowledge but also to cultivate moral character grounded in transcendent values. The exclusion of religion from normative reasoning in multicultural education is therefore seen as incompatible with Indonesia's educational philosophy and national ideology.

Resistance to the tendency toward secularization in the educational sphere may not be immediately visible, in the sense that it does not manifest in overt horizontal conflict or direct forms of opposition. Instead, such resistance is expressed through a growing preference among religious communities to enroll their children in faith-based educational institutions, as well as through the rapid proliferation of privately run religious schools.

Fourth, religious critiques also target the individualistic moral anthropology underlying liberal multicultural education. Liberal frameworks prioritize personal autonomy, individual choice, and rights-based ethics as foundational educational values. By contrast, Indonesian religious traditions emphasize communal responsibility, social harmony, and moral obligations toward family, community, and society. From this perspective, liberal multicultural education risks fostering a form of moral individualism that weakens collective ethical commitments and religiously grounded social responsibility.

Taken together, these four objections: normative pluralism, moral conflicts surrounding sexuality, secularization of religion, and moral individualism, do not amount to a rejection of diversity or peaceful coexistence. Rather, they reflect a demand for a model of multicultural education that recognizes religion as a legitimate source of public normativity, not merely as a cultural variable to be managed. However, can a particular religious-based (theological) model of multicultural education constitute an appropriate alternative?"

Challenges and Limitations of Theologically Based Multicultural Education

Indonesia exhibits extensive religious diversity despite its Muslim majority. Although constitutionally secular, the state actively supports religious life through the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA), which oversees community development (Bimas) and authorizes faith-based educational institutions for all recognized religions (agama resmi). Consequently, religious schooling is widespread and operates alongside national education standards, with some institutions remaining exclusive and others adopting inclusive enrollment policies.

Multicultural education has gained increasing prominence within this framework, supported by Law No. 20 of 2003 and Government Regulation No. 55 of 2007, which mandate democratic, non-discriminatory education and promote interreligious tolerance. Together, these provisions reflect the state's commitment to pluralism, while Indonesia's educational system continues to negotiate the tension between religious orthodoxy and social harmony through context-specific theological interpretations.

Islamic-based Multicultural Education

Islamic Multicultural Education refers to a model of multicultural education grounded in Islamic teachings and values. In Indonesia, it is commonly termed Pendidikan Multikultural Islami or Pendidikan Islam Multikultural, with both frameworks positioning Islamic doctrine as the epistemological foundation of multicultural pedagogy. Islamic principles thus shape the orientation, content, and implementation of this educational approach.

The discourse on Islamic multicultural education has been further enriched by the contributions of prominent contemporary Muslim thinkers in Indonesia. Nurcholish Madjid's philosophical outlook has been employed to articulate a vision of Islamic multicultural education that emphasizes inclusivity and pluralism [34]. Likewise, the philosophical framework of Musa Asy'arie has been explored as a foundational perspective in an anthology on multicultural education [35]. The educational philosophy of renowned Islamic scholar K.H. Imam Zarkasyi has also served as a basis for formulating multicultural pedagogy, alongside the ideas of Nahdlatul Ulama figure Said Aqil Siroj and the reformist Islamic thought of philosopher M. Amin Abdullah. These diverse intellectual legacies contribute to a rich and contextually grounded discourse on Islamic multicultural education.

Despite its alignment with inclusive interpretations of Islam, Islamic multicultural education in practice often exhibits certain theological constraints. These limitations arise from its reliance on normative religious foundations, which shape both its conceptual boundaries and practical applications. Consequently, issues commonly advanced within liberal multicultural frameworks, such as gender diversity and sexual orientation, are not always fully accommodated. This tension underscores the limits of theological inclusivity when confronted with values perceived to challenge established religious orthodoxy.

Liberal multiculturalism is predicated on cultural relativism, which assumes the normative equivalence of all cultural values and belief systems and denies the existence of an absolute truth [36], [37]. Islamic multiculturalism, by contrast, explicitly rejects relativism, as it is grounded in the conviction that ultimate truth emanates from divine revelation. Within this paradigm, Islamic teachings function as the primary normative reference for assessing other cultures. This position is encapsulated in the prophetic dictum *al-Islām ya'lū wa lā yu'lā 'alayh* ("Islam is supreme and nothing surpasses it"), which affirms Islam's claim to theological finality and perfection.

Accordingly, liberal multiculturalism advances the principle of equal truth claims, asserting that all religions are equally valid and allowing individuals to adopt, combine, or change belief systems without moral consequence [38], [39]. Islamic multiculturalism, while recognizing religious plurality as a social reality, rejects theological pluralism in matters of *'aqīdah*. The Qur'anic declaration *inna al-dīna 'inda Allāhi al-Islām* (Q. 3:19) reinforces Islam's exclusive claim to salvific truth, thereby framing tolerance as peaceful coexistence without doctrinal relativization.

In the realm of freedom of expression, liberal multiculturalism endorses expansive expressive liberties, including artistic and critical engagements with religion [40], [41]. Islamic multiculturalism, however, affirms freedom of speech within the ethical limits prescribed by *sharī'ah*, particularly prohibitions against blasphemy or the denigration of religious symbols. In Indonesia, these boundaries are institutionally reinforced through Article 156a of the Penal Code, which criminalizes religious defamation, illustrating how expressive freedom operates within a normatively religious public order.

With respect to lifestyle diversity, liberal multiculturalism prioritizes individual autonomy and accommodates a wide range of sexual, social, and cultural practices without imposing universal moral standards [42]. Islamic multiculturalism, in contrast, upholds a normative moral framework that rejects practices deemed incompatible with Islamic ethics, including premarital sexual relations, LGBT identities, and violations of standards of

modesty (aurat). While such practices may be socially tolerated among non-Muslims, they remain morally inadmissible within the Islamic evaluative framework.

Finally, liberal multiculturalism promotes religious neutrality in public spaces and educational institutions through secular curricula designed to prevent religious dominance [43]. Islamic multiculturalism challenges this premise by asserting that education must remain anchored in religious values and divine guidance. From this perspective, the marginalization of religion in education is viewed as an erosion of moral and epistemic foundations. Islamic multiculturalism thus contends that genuine pluralism does not necessitate the exclusion of religion, but rather its constructive integration as a source of ethical orientation. These marked contrasts are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Comparison of Liberal Multicultural Education and Islamic Multicultural Education

Aspect	Liberal Multicultural Education	Islamic Multicultural Education in Indonesia
Value Relativism	Embraces cultural relativism, viewing all belief systems as equally valid.	Rejects relativism; upholds absolute moral truths grounded in Islamic teachings.
Religious Pluralism	Promotes theological pluralism, accepting all religions as equally true.	Acknowledges religious diversity socially but affirms Islam as the ultimate truth.
Freedom of Expression	Advocates unrestricted expression, even when critical of religion or sacred symbols.	Supports freedom of speech within ethical and religious boundaries established by Islam.
Lifestyle Tolerance	Accepts diverse lifestyles (e.g., LGBTQ+, liberal dress codes) without moral judgment.	Endorses lifestyles aligned with Islamic principles; rejects those contrary to Sharia.
Religious Neutrality	Encourages secular education with religious neutrality in public institutions.	Promotes integration of religious values, emphasizing education rooted in the Islamic worldview.

Islamic multicultural education cannot be conflated with liberal multiculturalism, as it is fundamentally anchored in a theological epistemology. Whereas liberal approaches prioritize value neutrality and the equal validation of diverse belief systems, Islamic multiculturalism is shaped by normative religious doctrines that are frequently apologetic and, at times, explicitly polemical. This theological grounding generates inherent tensions with core multicultural principles, particularly those emphasizing egalitarian recognition, reciprocal respect, and the suspension of exclusive truth claims in intergroup engagement. Although Islamic multicultural education advances ideals of tolerance and coexistence, its dependence on doctrinal absolutes constrains its alignment with the more inclusive and relativistic orientation characteristic of liberal multiculturalism.

Limitations of Islamic-based Multicultural Education

Islamic multicultural education presents inherent challenges insofar as it is grounded in a theological orientation. Multicultural frameworks based on theology tend to retain apologetic and, at times, polemical tendencies that complicate the pursuit of genuine inclusivity in educational contexts. Within Islamic education, the reliance on absolute truths derived from divine revelation positions other beliefs and cultures to be assessed through a normative theological lens, rather than being recognized as morally or epistemologically equivalent. This dynamic produces an exclusivist posture within an educational model that ostensibly seeks to accommodate diversity. When multicultural education functions to reaffirm the normative supremacy of a particular religious tradition, it risks contradicting

the foundational premise of multiculturalism itself, namely, the recognition of difference without hierarchical valuation.

Furthermore, such theological frameworks frequently generate friction around freedom of expression, lifestyle practices, and personal identities that diverge from dominant religious norms. Limitations on critical engagement with religious symbols or the rejection of non-conforming identities reflect a conditional form of tolerance that remains tightly circumscribed. In contexts such as Indonesia, where state regulations and educational policies are often intertwined with religious considerations, this configuration may further institutionalize exclusivism and constrain the emergence of genuinely pluralistic learning environments. Consequently, theological multicultural education may operate less as a space for intercultural dialogue and critical engagement than as a mechanism for reproducing doctrinal norms, thereby limiting education's emancipatory potential and narrowing the scope for alternative perspectives.

On the one hand, liberal multicultural education often affords limited consideration to religious orthodoxy; on the other, Islamic multicultural education tends to be oriented toward textual conservatism, thereby carrying a substantial risk of becoming apologetic and polemical. This tension indicates the need for a mediating framework capable of bridging these two approaches. The critical question, however, concerns the normative and epistemological foundations upon which such a middle path should be constructed.

Religious Studies: A Breakthrough

Religious Studies is an academic discipline that examines religion through scientific, objective, and multidisciplinary methodologies. Its emergence as a modern field of inquiry is commonly traced to Max Müller's efforts in the early 1870s to distinguish it from Theology. Following this conceptual separation, Religious Studies does not aim to affirm or negate particular truth claims, but rather to analyze religious phenomena through critical, comparative, and empirical inquiry.

From the perspective of Religious Studies scholarship, the discipline's ontological orientation is fundamentally phenomenological. Religion is approached not solely as a system grounded in divine revelation, but also as a humanly mediated phenomenon expressed within concrete social, historical, and cultural contexts.

In Indonesia, Religious Studies is widely known as Studi Agama-Agama and is institutionally represented by the Indonesian Association for Religious Studies (ASAI). As noted by its secretary, Dr. Ustadhi Hamsah, the ontological foundation of Studi Agama-Agama conceptualizes religion as a phenomenon whose expressions are embedded in institutional and social structures. Accordingly, Religious Studies in the Indonesian context is concerned with the systematic study of both religion as doctrine and religiosity as lived practice [44].

Ontologically, Religious Studies conceptualizes religion through multiple lenses: as a social phenomenon shaping integration and change; as a belief system comprising doctrines and myths; as a psychological expression addressing human inner needs; and as a symbolic structure that constructs meaning through cultural symbols. Epistemologically, the discipline employs diverse methodologies, including empirical analysis of observable religious practices, hermeneutical interpretation of sacred texts within historical contexts, and phenomenological approaches that foreground lived religious experience. Axiologically, Religious Studies is value-oriented, linking the scholarly study of religion to human well-being, social cohesion, and the promotion of the common good [45].

Religious Multicultural Education (RME): The Prospective Middle Path in Religious Society

The epistemological basis of Religious Multicultural Education (RME) is shaped by the integration of two intersecting paradigms: multicultural education and Religious Studies. Multicultural education foregrounds the socially constructed character of knowledge, advocating the inclusion of marginalized voices, local epistemologies, and diverse cultural experiences, while critically challenging epistemic domination and monolithic truth claims. In parallel, Religious Studies is grounded in a multidisciplinary and phenomenological orientation that emphasizes *verstehen*, or empathetic understanding of religions within their own contexts. Together, these approaches promote dialogical inquiry, epistemic pluralism, and intellectual humility in engaging religious diversity.

The epistemological synthesis underlying Religious Multicultural Education (RME) by juxtaposing multicultural education and Religious Studies across key analytical dimensions. Multicultural education conceptualizes knowledge as socially constructed and foregrounds marginalized voices through a critical stance that resists epistemic monism. Religious Studies, by contrast, is grounded in a multidisciplinary and phenomenological commitment to *verstehen*, emphasizing empathetic and dialogical engagement with religious traditions without collapsing them into relativism. RME emerges from the integration of these paradigms, advancing a plural, dialogical, and context-sensitive understanding of knowledge. Its core orientation combines critical reflexivity with empathetic respect, aiming to produce inclusive and transformative knowledge. Rather than rejecting truth or asserting theological supremacy, RME affirms plurality while preserving the integrity of distinct traditions. Educationally, this synthesis aspires to foster reflexive, dialogical learning that supports interfaith understanding and intercultural harmony.

On this basis, RME responds to the contested aspects distinctly presented in Table 1. This demonstrates the position of RME as a mediating framework capable of bridging liberal multicultural education and forms of multicultural education that are excessively theological.

Table 2. A Dialogical and Contextual Framework of Religious Multicultural Education in Plural Societies

No.	Aspect	Religious Multicultural Education (RME)
1.	Value Relativism	Rejects moral relativism while recognizing epistemic plurality; affirms ethical commitments alongside dialogical engagement with diverse value systems.
2.	Religious Pluralism	Affirms religious plurality as a social and dialogical reality without collapsing doctrinal differences or endorsing theological relativism.
3.	Freedom of Expression	Supports critical expression guided by ethical responsibility, fostering respectful critique without legitimizing symbolic violence or denigration of faith.
4.	Lifestyle Tolerance	Promotes social coexistence and civic respect across lifestyle differences while allowing religious communities to maintain normative ethical boundaries.
5.	Religious Neutrality	Rejects strict secular neutrality by acknowledging the public role of religion, while ensuring inclusive and non-hegemonic engagement among traditions.

If implemented within the Indonesian educational context, the RME paradigm outlined in the table would exert a significant and constructive influence on both educational practice and policy. By rejecting moral relativism while affirming epistemic plurality, RME provides a normative framework that resonates with Indonesia's constitutional recognition

of religious values without collapsing into dogmatism. This balance enables schools to cultivate ethical commitments rooted in particular traditions while simultaneously fostering dialogical competencies necessary for engagement in a plural society. In practice, this would encourage curricula that emphasize moral reasoning and interreligious dialogue rather than value-neutral instruction or confessional indoctrination.

The affirmation of religious plurality as a social and dialogical reality, without endorsing theological relativism, is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where religious diversity coexists with strong doctrinal identities. RME allows educational institutions to acknowledge doctrinal differences openly while reframing them as resources for dialogue rather than sources of conflict. This approach supports interfaith literacy and mutual understanding without requiring religious communities to dilute their theological convictions, thereby reducing resistance from faith-based educational institutions.

In terms of freedom of expression, RME's emphasis on ethical responsibility offers a context-sensitive alternative to both unrestricted liberal expression and restrictive theological control. Applied in Indonesian schools, this paradigm would legitimize critical inquiry and respectful critique while maintaining sensitivity to religious symbols and sentiments. Such an approach can mitigate polarization by promoting critical thinking that is dialogical rather than confrontational, aligning with Indonesia's socio-cultural emphasis on harmony and mutual respect.

Regarding lifestyle tolerance, RME promotes civic coexistence without imposing uniform moral standards across diverse communities. This has practical implications for Indonesian education, where tensions often arise around issues of lifestyle, identity, and morality. RME enables schools to uphold communal ethical norms while teaching students to respect differences within a shared civic framework. Consequently, education functions not as a site of moral imposition or permissiveness, but as a space for negotiating pluralism responsibly.

RME's rejection of strict secular neutrality, coupled with its insistence on non-hegemonic engagement, aligns closely with Indonesia's model of state–religion relations. Rather than excluding religion from public education or privileging a single tradition, RME legitimizes the public role of religion while ensuring inclusivity. This paradigm supports an educational environment in which religious perspectives contribute to public reasoning without dominating it, thereby strengthening social cohesion.

The adoption of RME in Indonesia would reposition education as a mediating arena between liberal multiculturalism and theological exclusivism. It offers a contextually grounded model capable of fostering critical, ethical, and dialogical citizens suited to Indonesia's plural yet religiously informed social reality.

The Prospective Roles of Religious Multicultural Education (RME) in Fostering SDGs in Indonesia

Religious Multicultural Education (RME) holds significant potential as a normative and pedagogical framework for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within Indonesia's plural yet deeply religious social landscape [46]. As the SDGs emphasize inclusive development, social justice, peace, and sustainability, their realization depends not merely on technocratic policies but also on ethical orientations, cultural legitimacy, and social trust. In Indonesia, where religion remains a central source of moral authority and collective meaning, educational approaches that marginalize religious values risk limited social resonance [47]. RME addresses this challenge by integrating the ethical resources of religious traditions with the critical and dialogical commitments of multicultural education, thereby aligning global development agendas with local moral imaginaries.

In relation to SDG 4 (Quality Education), RME contributes by fostering inclusive, equitable, and dialogically oriented learning environments. Unlike liberal multicultural

education, which often adopts value-neutrality, and theological education, which may reproduce exclusivism, RME cultivates critical religious literacy, ethical reflexivity, and interreligious understanding without collapsing doctrinal differences into relativism. This orientation supports learners' cognitive, moral, and civic development, enabling education to function not only as a means of knowledge transmission but also as a space for negotiating pluralism responsibly. Through RME, educational institutions can nurture students who are capable of engaging diversity constructively while remaining grounded in their respective moral traditions.

RME also plays a strategic role in advancing SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by strengthening social cohesion and mitigating identity-based conflict. Indonesia's history demonstrates that religious diversity, when inadequately mediated, can become a source of polarization and social tension. RME reframes religious difference as a dialogical resource rather than a zero-sum competition of truth claims. By emphasizing empathetic understanding (*verstehen*), ethical responsibility, and non-hegemonic engagement among religious communities, RME equips citizens with the dispositions necessary for peaceful coexistence and participatory democracy. In this sense, education becomes a preventive mechanism against radicalization, intolerance, and social fragmentation.

Furthermore, RME contributes to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by promoting recognition and dignity across cultural and religious differences while remaining sensitive to contextual moral frameworks. Rather than imposing uniform moral standards or endorsing uncritical relativism, RME encourages inclusive civic respect and dialogical negotiation of contested values. This approach is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where development initiatives often encounter resistance when perceived as undermining religious or cultural norms. By embedding equality and inclusion within a dialogical religious-multicultural framework, RME enhances the cultural legitimacy of the SDGs and supports their sustainable implementation.

In sum, RME functions as a culturally grounded educational strategy that bridges global development goals and local ethical realities. Its prospective role in fostering the SDGs lies in its capacity to translate universal aspirations, such as peace, inclusion, and justice, into context-sensitive educational practices that resonate with Indonesia's religiously informed public sphere. By positioning education as a mediating arena between global norms and local values, RME strengthens the social foundations necessary for achieving sustainable development in plural societies.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that debates on multicultural education in religiously grounded societies, particularly within the Indonesian context, cannot be adequately addressed through either liberal multicultural education or theologically based multicultural frameworks alone. Liberal multiculturalism, with its emphasis on value neutrality, moral relativism, and individual autonomy, tends to marginalize religion by relegating it to the private sphere and stripping it of public normative authority. Conversely, theologically grounded models of multicultural education, while seeking to preserve religious authenticity and moral coherence, frequently reproduce apologetic, exclusivist, and polemical orientations that constrain dialogue and undermine the egalitarian ethos central to multicultural education. In response to these conceptual limitations, this study proposes Religious Multicultural Education (RME) as a prospective middle path. Anchored epistemologically in Religious Studies, RME offers a non-confessional, critical, and dialogical framework that neither dismisses religion through liberal secularism nor instrumentalizes it through theological absolutism. By integrating the critical commitments of multicultural education with the empathetic and phenomenological orientation of Religious Studies, RME affirms epistemic plurality without collapsing doctrinal differences into relativism or asserting hierarchical truth claims within educational spaces. Within the

Indonesian socio-educational context, RME holds particular relevance. It resonates with a societal configuration in which religion remains a central source of moral meaning while pluralism constitutes an enduring social reality. RME enables educational institutions to engage religious traditions as legitimate contributors to public reasoning while safeguarding inclusivity and preventing hegemonic domination. In doing so, education is repositioned as a mediating arena, one that cultivates ethical reflexivity, dialogical competence, and interreligious literacy rather than value-neutral indifference or confessional indoctrination. Religious Multicultural Education (RME) offers a culturally grounded educational framework that holds strong potential for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Indonesia's religiously plural yet morally rooted social context. By integrating the ethical resources of religious traditions with the critical and dialogical orientation of multicultural education, RME bridges global development aspirations with local normative realities. This approach enables education to contribute meaningfully to key SDGs, particularly quality education, social inclusion, and peaceful coexistence, without reproducing either liberal secular marginalization of religion or theological exclusivism. As a mediating paradigm, RME strengthens the moral legitimacy, social cohesion, and dialogical capacities necessary for sustainable development, positioning education as a strategic arena for translating universal SDG principles into context-sensitive and socially resonant practices. Theoretically, this study contributes to the ongoing reconfiguration of multicultural education by introducing an epistemologically grounded alternative capable of bridging the persistent divide between liberal and theological paradigms. Practically, it offers a conceptual foundation for educational policy and curriculum development in religiously plural societies seeking to balance moral commitment with social cohesion. Future research should extend this conceptual framework through empirical investigation, examining how RME may be operationalized across diverse educational settings and assessing its impact on intercultural dialogue, social trust, and democratic coexistence.

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Author Contribution

Erham Budi Wiranto developed the conceptual framework, conducted the primary literature review, and drafted the initial manuscript. Waston and Mohamad Ali contributed to the theoretical refinement and critical analysis of multicultural education paradigms. Wachidi and Andri Nirwana supported data interpretation and methodological design. Saif Uddin Ahmed Khondoker provided comparative perspectives and international context, while Siswanto Masruri contributed to final editing and language review. All authors collaboratively reviewed, revised, and approved the final version.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that this research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as potential conflicts of interest. There are no personal, institutional, or ideological interests that have influenced the research process, analysis, or interpretation of findings. All authors confirm that the study was carried out objectively, maintaining academic integrity and transparency, and that the results presented in this article are solely based on scholarly considerations and independent inquiry.

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